

Hispanic Heritage Month Celebrates Cultural Diversity
By Amaani Lyle
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 15, 2014 - Since 1968, when President Lyndon B. Johnson was in office, America has observed National Hispanic Heritage Month from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15 to celebrate the contributions and culture of citizens of Latin American descent.

Today's start of National Hispanic Heritage Month also marks the anniversary of independence for Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, while independence days for Mexico and Chile are observed, respectively, Sept. 16 and Sept. 18.

In an interview with The Pentagon Channel, Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Juan G. Ayala, Marine Corps Installations Command facilities service division commander, noted history shows Hispanics have made an impact in all walks of the military, government and industry.

Diversity is an asset

"It's an important time of the year to highlight the contributions Hispanics have made not only to the military but to the nation as a whole," he said. "If you look at the last 12 years of war and . the contributions of Hispanics, you'll see they've participated in every operation and they've done so with distinction, with honor and they'll continue to do so."

Ayala emphasized the importance of diversity within the Marine Corps and beyond not only as a reflection of the country, but as an impetus to increase military efficiency and readiness.

"Only 1 percent of the population of the United States is in the military," Ayala said. "We're not different because we're Hispanics, we are Americans and we reflect what this country is about and what the founding fathers wanted it to be."

The eldest of nine children, Ayala recounted his own journey to the Marine Corps, noting that his late parents were immigrants who had little grasp of the English language.

"I remember seeing my neighbors go into the Marine Corps and they were completely different people when they came back. I was very impressed," the general said. "I thought I could really give back by joining, and ever since I was in the fifth grade I knew I wanted to become a United States Marine."

Important values

Values such as selflessness, hard work, dignity, and respect for all mirror the Marine Corps' core values, Ayala said.

"After 35 years, I still had that good baggage from my family and that work ethic; it's just a reflection of who we are," said Ayala, adding the same principles apply in battle.

"We don't leave a Marine behind -- it's all about your unit, your leadership and your Marine," he said.

Ayala said his role models come from various backgrounds.

"We don't get here by ourselves -- it's on the backs and shoulders of a lot of great people," he said.

The general credited his father, as well as Marine Corps' commissioned and noncommissioned officers of all backgrounds, who mentored him and guided his career.

Prepare for the future

The general said his best advice to younger generations is to finish education in both high school and college to prepare for future leadership roles in the military and industry, each of which rely on diversity to increase their effectiveness.

"It's not about getting numbers for numbers' sake," Ayala said. "[Diversity] makes us more ready to fight and defend our nation."

Ayala also said he encourages service members to join celebrations at bases and installations and to reach out to Hispanics to learn about their stories.

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